

Advancing University Core Values by Developing an Honors College

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The mid-1960s were a time of historic social and cultural change, creating a perfect climate for a small university with a handful of students and some revolutionary ideas to take shape. During that dynamic era, Nova Southeastern University (NSU) was founded in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. In 2014, NSU celebrated fifty years of growth, innovation, and inclusive educational opportunities; today it is the largest, not-for-profit, private university in the state with approximately 26,000 students. Just twelve years ago, the university's undergraduate honors program was initiated, and this past summer we elevated our commitment from a high-impact honors program housed within a traditional college of arts and sciences to a multidisciplinary honors college. The new honors college is one instance of an institution that, true to its dynamic origins, is constantly changing to suit the times. As the university's sixth president, I serve to usher in a new era and a renewed vision of core values for this young and aspiring institution.

The establishment of the Farquhar Honors College reflects the importance the university places on promoting excellence across all degree levels and disciplines. NSU takes pride in becoming one of the approximately two hundred U.S. universities out of more than four thousand colleges and universities to house an honors college. The honors college was born out of our recognition that high academic performance is coterminous with leadership and out of our desire to acknowledge publicly the premier scholarship demonstrated by our students. Our honors college is designed to unleash a crucial potential in all students: the ability to lead.

A CLEAR VISION

In pursuit of defining the NSU of tomorrow, in 2010 I collaborated with each of our constituent groups, including student leaders and community members (more than 5,000 individuals in total), to create a single, shared vision. NSU's Vision 2020, our new mission statement, and a new set of core values have collectively guided our decisions, including the establishment of the NSU Honors College. As both NSU and the National Collegiate Honors Council mark our fifty-year anniversaries, reminding ourselves of our values is central to us all.

NSU's Vision 2020 declares, "By 2020, through excellence and innovations in teaching, research, service, and learning, Nova Southeastern University will be recognized by accrediting agencies, the academic community, and the general public as a premier, private, not-for-profit university of quality and distinction that engages all students and produces alumni who serve with integrity in their lives, fields of study, and resulting careers." Our statement is audacious because we believe NSU—like our peer institutions—is an important contributor to the future of education. The creation of the honors college is advancing our goals by giving honors a greater impact among undergraduate and graduate students, honors alumni, faculty and staff members from all disciplines, and our community at large. Making connections between undergraduate and graduate students is especially valuable at NSU as we have a proportionately larger graduate student population that can help transition and inspire undergraduate students as they enter the next phase of their studies.

A FOCUSED MISSION

Honors colleges exemplify university missions in action through their unique and challenging seminars, travel study in domestic locations and abroad, scholarship support, and faculty mentorships for students pursuing research and international fellowships. Honors educators also provide events that generate productive discussions and collaborations across the disciplines. NSU's honors college, like many others, hosts events open to the entire university and the community, bringing together learners, educators, and inquisitive minds from various academic backgrounds, industries, and organizations.

CORE VALUES

Bringing a new shared mission and vision to reality requires shared values. Students need to know what we stand for: what values we hold sacrosanct and will not compromise for expediency. Therefore, NSU established eight core values to support the university's renewed vision and mission.

1. “Academic Excellence” is the provision of highest-quality teaching and learning experiences provided by the most academically and professionally qualified instructional faculty and staff, opportunities for contextual learning, state-of-the-art facilities, beautiful surroundings, and the resources necessary to support learning at the highest level. Additionally, academic excellence reflects the successful relationship between engaged learners and outstanding instructional faculty and staff.

Students come to NSU and remain because of inspiring faculty. Likewise, faculty members are inspired by enthused and engaged students. This relationship is the foundation of academic excellence and is the heart of the honors tradition. In addition to teaching honors courses, honors faculty provide talent identification and support for students pursuing national and international fellowships and scholarships; lead honors workshops and travel study trips; serve as advisors for multidisciplinary academic honor societies; and mentor honors students engaged in research, creative projects, and other forms of scholarship.

2. “Student-Centered” education is the focus of our institutional priorities, resource decisions, and planning. We are stewards of students’

needs and advocates for their academic success and professional development. We challenge all students to take full advantage of the entire college experience; to exercise passionate curiosity; and to interact in and outside of the classroom. In return, we promise to offer comprehensive collegial experiences that prepare them for a lifetime of learning, professional success, and social responsibility. At NSU, part of fulfilling this promise was the establishment of the honors college.

The social component of honors, which includes group visits to museums, murder mystery dinners, theatre, and opera as well as kayaking and horseback riding trips, fosters peer support. Honors students see themselves as part of a team rather than as competitors with one another—a quality that may be rare among groups of high-achieving, highly motivated students but that we know to be particularly important to future employers and colleagues.

3. The Core Value of “Integrity” naturally hinges on honesty and fairness, consistency in instruction, ethics of scholarship, freedom of inquiry, and open and truthful engagement with the community through effective communication, policies, and practices.

Wherever honors students find themselves, they are expected to act with integrity as representatives of their university and as a reflection of their personal value systems.

The NSU Honors Pledge also speaks directly about academic integrity, challenging students to be leaders and role models in all aspects of their lives. When we charge honors students to look at their new peers as part of a future professional network, it makes a positive difference in their interactions and relationships.

4. “Innovation” is defined by NSU as the creative and deliberate application of teaching, research, scholarship and service for effective education and the development of useful products or processes providing added value to the community.

Honors education champions innovative educational models, which may include team teaching; group assignments; an emphasis on small and interactive classes focused on unique and timely topics and themes; professional networking opportunities; and undergraduate research potentially leading to an honors thesis, national publication, or presentation at conferences.

5. “Opportunity” fosters the possibility for anyone associated with NSU to acquire an education or an educational experience through creative, sound pedagogical programs.

In an honors environment, opportunity has no boundaries. Honors students are supported through scholarships, invited to combine disparate areas of study, and encouraged to pursue experiences beyond the ordinary. Honors faculty can set higher standards and allow for greater flexibility.

6. NSU’s “Research and Scholarship” products are disseminated and evaluated through intellectual discourse, application, assessment, and other mechanisms of the relevant peer community.

Honors colleges house various initiatives that help our undergraduate students develop, test, and share their research and scholarship. At NSU, the Undergraduate Student Symposium is entering its fifteenth year, encouraging students of all majors to challenge their own assumptions and hypotheses in order to uncover new ways of interpreting the world around them. Past symposium winners have explored their family genetics, deconstructed a great American novel, analyzed the thought behind free-form dance, and sought to contribute to cancer research. Through such programs, honors education empowers students to experience firsthand the process and rewards of discovery.

7. The core value of “Diversity” includes but is not limited to race, ethnicity, culture, religion, philosophy, gender, physical, socioeconomic status, age, and sexual orientation. Differences in views, interpretations, and reactions derived from diversity help prepare individuals to live, love, work, and compete in a global economy. I am proud of the fact that NSU is a minority-majority university and recognized as a Hispanic Serving Institution that perceives diversity as a strength.

The honors community has an even broader diversity as our collective student bodies represent all majors, many countries, many faiths, and other identifying qualities. Honors students across the country are likely to engage and become friends with students of different backgrounds and experiences. Intellectually, students are challenged in honors classes to strengthen critical thinking by considering positions other than their own.

8. NSU is a “Community” with a common identity and purpose that engages with the external community through diverse services, clinical programs, and community-based research and resources. Our community extends into professional, intellectual, and geographical domains that both support and are the focus of our educational mission.

Honors colleges have a history of involvement with community outreach programs. NSU is committed to making an overall contribution to the future of our community and its capacity to compete globally for business, talent, and culture. In my opinion, it would be irresponsible for us, as university leaders in a knowledge-based economy, not to consider how to leverage our resources for the benefit of community residents.

HONORS OUTCOMES

NSU’s vision, mission, and values are consistent with those of an honors education. To help bring our university’s goals to fruition, the honors college dean, honors faculty, and university leadership established core outcomes that reflect the well-established successes of honors colleges nationwide.

Honors college initiatives and projects are aligned to these outcomes, which are expected for all honors students. Students develop a four-year program to enhance strengths in five domains, and honors faculty are highly vested in these outcomes, mentoring students to develop and advance their plans.

1. “Inquiry”—Students will demonstrate skills in scholarship and research necessary to succeed in graduate or professional school and/or the workforce.
2. “Innovation and Creativity”—Students will recognize and apply multidisciplinary approaches to analyzing and solving problems.
3. “Global Awareness and Sensitivity”—Students will discuss international matters and engage with cultures from around the world.
4. “Art and Culture”—Students will analyze and appreciate cultural artifacts.
5. “Ethics and Engagement”—Students will demonstrate a commitment to ethical principles through engagement in the community.

THE HONORS INFLUENCE

Prospective and current students see such outcomes as attractive, distinguishing qualities of an honors education and a primary reason to enroll and remain at our institutions. Achieving these outcomes also serves as a source of pride and influence for our institution. Honors student success is historically impressive, with high graduation rates and significant engagement in college athletics, campus leadership roles, and community service.

Other signs of success for honors on our campus include the use of honors course structures and approaches in non-honors classrooms. At NSU, for example, faculty are adopting practices such as problem-based instruction, student-led discussions, and novel-reading seminars in their regular courses. Honors alumni engagement is also comparatively strong and serves as a role model for fellow alumni. Each spring more than fifty honors alumni return to campus for our NSU Honors Banquet, sharing stories of their experiences in college and the real world with current students. Our alumni have also started to give back to NSU by donating to support student scholarships, an admirable tradition that is well established at other honors institutions.

We have made it clear through our commitment to the Farquhar Honors College—and all that it embodies—that an honors education is not an isolated phenomenon: it reflects the broader university and the global community. NSU’s new Farquhar Honors College is yet another reason our students and more than 170,000 alumni in all fifty states and more than sixty-three foreign countries remain engaged with their alma mater. On behalf of NSU, I am proud to be part of the Farquhar Honors College and the evolving honors tradition that contributes to the advancement of the academy and our civic society through education.

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